My Story: Individuals Within the Civil Rights Movement

Historical Context:

Although the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s involved mass demonstrations by large groups of people, the actions and experiences of individuals within the movement stand out as contributing to its overall success. While individuals such as Rosa Parks and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. have become national symbols, many other lesser known individuals have also played a key role in the pursuit of the goals of the Civil Rights Movement.

Task:

Identify three individuals and describe the impact of their actions and/or experiences on the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s

**Document 1**





Questions:

1. Why do you think Fred Shuttlesworth was referred to as *the man most feared by Southern racists*?
2. What sacrifices did Reverend Shuttlesworth make in order to fight for Civil Rights?

**Document 2:**



Students from the Nashville Movement take up the ride in Birmingham. The Rev Fred Shuttlesworth with Freedom Riders Charles Butler, Catherine Burks, Lucretia Collins, and Salynn McCollum in the "white" Greyhound terminal waiting room.

1. What do you think Reverend Shuttlesworth might be saying to these Freedom Riders?
2. Why is Reverend Shuttlesworth’s presence at this bus station significant?

**Document 3:**

The following is a letter written to Martin Luther King Jr. from Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth:

From Fred L. Shuttlesworth

**24** April **1959**

Birmingham, Ala.

Dear Martin,

I am writing you this letter because **I** feel that the leadership in Alabama among

Negroes is, at this time, much less dynamic and imaginative than it ought be. Mote

than this, there have been several serious incidents of beatings and kidnappings

in the last few days; plus the fact that very much publicity is being given by our

governor and the legislative forces to the forthcoming batch of segregation bills;

and nothing has been said or done by us as leaders together to protest on an organized

basis or to make Negroes who follow us believe that we are watching carefully

these tactics, and making **plans** to meet them.\*

I am sure that none know, more than you of my desire to cooperate fully with

all areas in Alabama that are putting any kind of fight at,all for Civil Rights. Surely

you know of how I have plugged over and over again in our meetings for some

type of set up so that we could make organized protests and take organized actions

when something happens in our state. To date this has not been done, nor

does there seem to be any way of getting the leaders of movements in Alabama

together to such an extent. But I believe that time is running out **for** this thing to

be done.

Neither have I any doubt that conferences once in a while without positive action

to follow will help us to reach the goal we are seeking. And I have often stated

that when the flowery speeches have been made, we still have the hard job of getting

down and helping people to work to reach the idealistic state of human affairs

which we desire. Even in our Southern Christian Leadership Conference, I

believe we must move now, or else the hard put in the not too distant future, to

justice our existence. Thus, I hope that our forthcoming gathering in Tallahassee

on May **13-14** will be the best, and that we can really lay some positive plans for

action. Events of the past few days-actions named above and Appellate dismissal

on technicalities of our bus appeal make me believe that now is the time for serious

thinking and practical resulting action.

Sincerely yours,

[signed]

Fred

1. Describe the relationship between Fred Shuttlesworth and Martin Luther King Jr.
2. What is Reverend Shuttlesworth asking of Dr. King in this letter?
3. What role did Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth play in the Civil Rights movement?

**Document 4:**

**LIUZZO, VIOLA 1926-1965** 

**A March of Hope**

In the spring of 1965 the Nobel Peace Prize winner and civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. led a march from Selma, Alabama, to the state's capital of Montgomery. The avowed purpose was to present Alabama governor George Wallace with a petition protesting voting discrimination in the state. The main purpose was to draw attention to the plight of blacks in the segregated South. On 21 March thousands of participants began the fifty-mile trek to the capital. While there were some hecklers, there was little serious harassment of the marchers. The federal government had mobilized a small army to prevent any violence. Over one thousand military police were present as well as nearly two thousand federalized Alabama National Guardsmen, supplemented by federal marshals and FBI agents. Precautions even extended to having demolition experts search the bridges in the protestors' path.

**Viola Liuzzo Joins the March**

The marchers were composed of a wide variety of people. Many were blacks from Alabama. But the protest had drawn not only seasoned civil rights workers, but also citizens from throughout the country. One of these was Viola Liuzzo, a white, thirty-nine-year-old mother of five from Detroit, Michigan. On 16 March she took part in a civil rights march in Detroit to express support for the upcoming protest in Alabama. On the spur of the moment she decided to go to Alabama to participate in the main event. She called her husband and told him that she would be going with some friends to Selma. Her husband tried to convince her to come home and talk it over first, but she refused. She insisted that it "was everybody's fight" and that she had to go.

**The Rally**

The culmination of the march came on Thursday, 25 March. An immense crowd collected in front of the capital building in Montgomery, Alabama. Those who had made the march were joined by others who appeared to show support and to protest the state government's policies. A series of speakers came forward, including Martin Luther King, Jr. who called for more marches to protest other forms of racial discrimination. The governor refused the petition, claiming that the protest was a "prostitution of the legal process." However, the march and the rally had successfully attracted national attention to voting discrimination and other complaints of black Americans.

**Returning Home,**

After the speeches were completed the crowd broke up, and the people returned to their homes. Many of the protesters lived in Selma, and Liuzzo helped out by giving rides in her car between the cities. She had walked with the marchers the first day and later had assisted by driving demonstrators back and forth along the route. On Thursday evening she carried a car-load back to Selma. After dropping off her passengers she headed back toward Montgomery to pick up some more. It was 7:30 in the evening. With her in the car was a black man, Leroy Moton, nineteen, a member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, a civil rights group. All seemed normal until they reached a deserted stretch of highway twenty miles from Selma.

**Terror on the Highway**

Liuzzo and Moton were not aware that they had been targeted by a group of four Klansmen who were "looking for excitement." Eugene Thomas and William Eaton, both steelworkers, along with Collie Wilkins, a mechanic, and Gary Rowe, a bar-tender, had driven down from Birmingham earlier in the day. They spotted Liuzzo and Moton at a stoplight and followed them down the highway. The presence of the black man and a white woman together in the car immediately ignited their anger. Thomas insisted that they were "going to take that automobile." Outside of Selma, they speeded up, pulling alongside Liuzzo's car. Two shots were fired through the front windshield. One struck Liuzzo in the head, killing her. The car swerved off the road before coming to stop. Moton turned off the ignition and cut off the automobile's lights and waited. After about five minutes he heard a car return which shined its lights at the Liuzzo automobile. Then it drove away. Moton then managed to hitchhike back to Selma, where he informed the police of the shooting.

**An Informer in the Klan**

The others in the car did not know Rowe was an FBI informant. He had been used by the law-enforcement agency to obtain information on the Ku Klux Klan for over five years, for which he had been paid nine thousand dollars. His cooperation allowed the police to capture the assailants within hours of the attack. He was also the key government witness, the only one who could identify the attackers.

**Justice Deferred**

Wilkins was tried in May 1965 in Lowndes County where the murder had occurred. The prosecution presented the testimony of Moton regarding the events of the attack. However, from his vantage in the car he had not been able to identify the gunmen. Then came Rowe who testified that Wilkins had fired the first two shots through the windshield, after which the other men in the car opened fire. The prosecution then presented other evidence which tended to tie the defendants to the area at the time of the shootings and which identified the gun which fired the fatal shot as a revolver found in Thomas's home. The defense attorney was a Klansman, who harangued the jury with his racist philosophy and sought to attack Rowe's credibility because he had betrayed his Klan oath of silence. After ten hours of deliberation the jury was hopelessly deadlocked, and a mistrial was declared.

**A Second Chance**

The difficulty of convicting Klansmen for murder of civil rights workers did not prevent the prosecution from trying to convict Wilkins again in October 1965. The attorney general of Alabama, Richmond Flowers, exercised his right to take over the prosecution from local authorities. His case was essentially a repeat of the prior trial. The main difference was that Wilkins had abandoned his Klan attorney for the less belligerent Arthur Hanes, who hammered away at inconsistencies in the prosecution's witnesses' testimonies and presented alibi witnesses. The jury found Wilkins not guilty.

**Third Trial**

Instead of attempting to try the remaining suspects for murder, a new course was adopted. Wilkins, Thomas, and Eaton were charged with violating an 1870 federal law which makes it a crime to conspire to deprive a citizen of his or her civil rights. Arguing that murder does just that, federal prosecutors brought the three men to trial in federal court in December 1965. The witnesses and testimony were much the same as in the earlier trials, but this time the judge refused to accept a hung jury. Although initially deadlocked, the judge sent them back to try again, and after another four hours of deliberation, they returned a verdict of guilty against the defendants. Judge Johnson then sentenced each of them to the maximum sentence allowed, ten years in prison.

**Sources:**

"Juries and Justice in Alabama," *Time,* 86 (29 October 1965): 49;

"The Law and De Lawd," *Time,* 86 (10 December 1965): 38;

"Protest on Route 80," *Time,* 85 (2 April 1965): 21;

"Trial," *Time,* 85 (14 May 1965): 27;

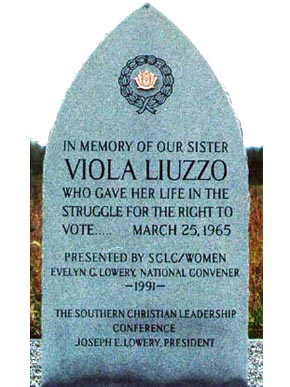
"Trial by Jury," *Newsweek,* 66 (1 November 1965): 36;

"Uncolored Justice," *Newsweek,* 66 (13 December 1965): 34.

Questions:

1. Why did Viola Liuzzo feel compelled to participate in the march from Selma to Montgomery?
2. Why was Viola Liuzzo targeted by members of the Ku Klux Klan?
3. Describe the process of bringing Viola Liuzzo’s murderers to justice:

**Document 5:**



Questions:

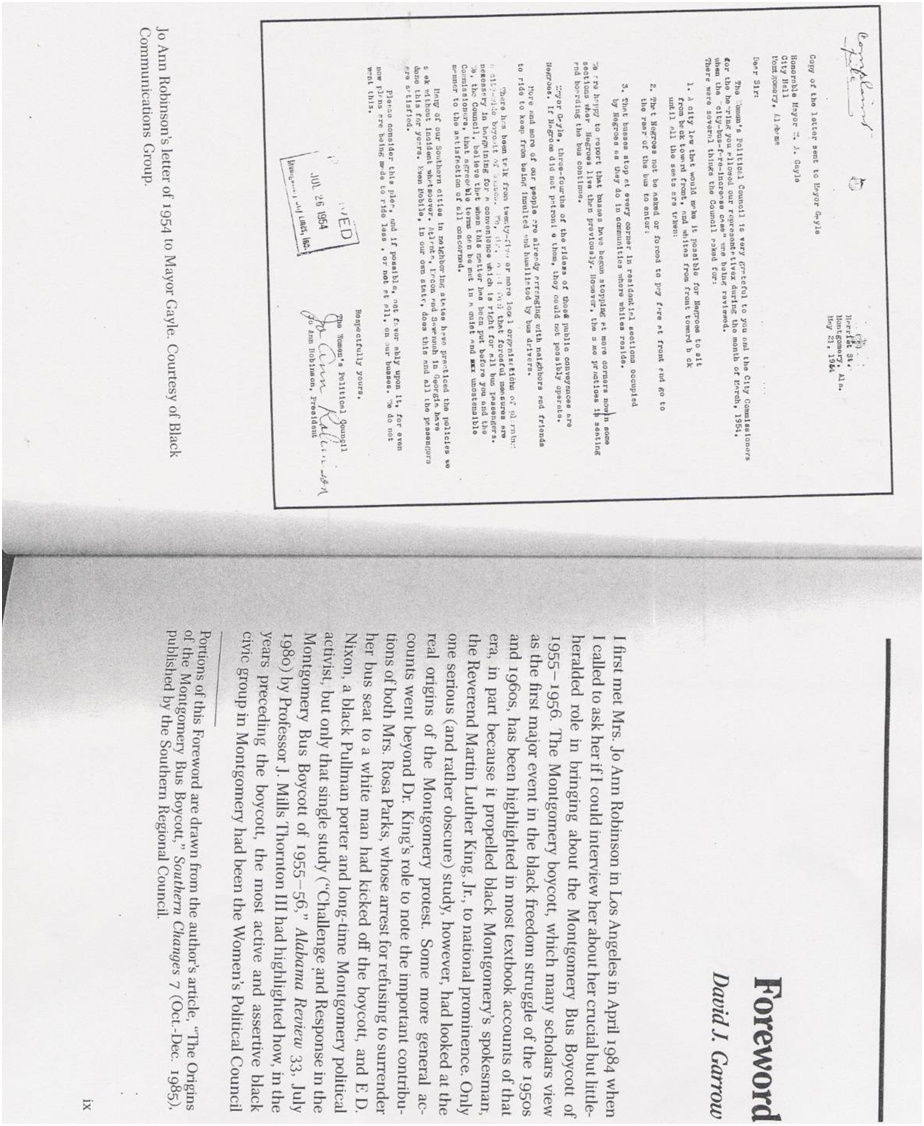
1. D escribe the purpose of the memorial above:
2. Describe Viola Liuzzo’s contribution to the Civil Rights Movement:

**Document 6:**



Questions: 1. List the ways that identify Jo Ann Robinson as an educated person.

**Document 7:**



Questions: 1. Identify the three items that the Women’s Political Council was requesting.

2 What was the organization planning?

3 How did the actions of Jo Ann Robinson impact the Civil Rights Movement?

**Document 8:**

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|  | http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/subimages/2_1_2blueline.gif  Emmett TillEmmett Louis Till was born in Chicago on July 25, 1941. Emmett was the only child of Louis and [Mamie Till](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/peopleevents/p_parents.html). He never knew his father, a soldier, who died during World War II.  **Early Life** At the age of five, Emmett was stricken with polio. He recovered but was left with a slight stutter. Despite his childhood illness, he grew up a happy boy. Emmett pitched in with the chores. His mother recalled he once told her, "if you can go out and make the money, I can take care of the house." This was welcome news for a woman raising a child alone. "It was just like I was carrying a load and I laid it down," she said.  **Thriving Black Neighborhood** Emmett and Mamie TillEmmett, nicknamed Bobo, was surrounded by relatives and grandparents. He attended the all-black McCosh Elementary School not far from his home. The solidly middle class neighborhood on Chicago's South Side where he grew up was a Mecca in which black-owned establishments thrived. Although blacks and whites were segregated, it was a fertile time for black businesses. There were black-owned and operated insurance companies, tailors, pharmacists, barbers, beauty salons and nightclubs that regularly hosted performers like Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Dinah Washington and Sarah Vaughn.  **Outgoing and Funny** Class photoYoung Emmett's personality was infectious. "He loved to tell jokes," said his cousin, Wheeler Parker. "He would pay people to tell him jokes."  In the summer of 1955, Emmett had just turned 14. He and his friends were enjoying the summer and dancing to a new music called rock and roll.  "The boys wore crepe-soled shoes, polyester pants and the girls wore skirts with the crinoline underneath. You must have the crinoline," said Cooksie Magnolia, who grew up with Emmett on the same street. "Young girls wore flared skirts so when their male partners spun them around, their skirts would have that extra flare."  "That was a good time because where we grew up, a lot of guys listened to the Moonglows, the Coasters, the Flamingos and the Spaniels," said Richard Heard, one of Emmett's classmates. "We'd try to imitate them in our little singing groups. It was a lot of fun."  One afternoon, Heard was invited to Emmett's house for bologna sandwiches and Kool-Aid. They were all looking forward to returning to school together in the fall where they would complete eighth grade and move on to high school. Heard never knew that would be the last time he would see his friend alive.  "Emmett was a funny guy all the time. He had a suitcase of jokes that he liked to tell," said Heard. "He loved to make people laugh. He was a chubby kid; most of the guys were skinny, but he didn't let that stand in his way. He made a lot of friends at McCosh Grammar School where we went to school."  **Mississippi Trip** Emmett TillIn August 1955, Emmett's great uncle [Moses Wright](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/peopleevents/p_wrights.html) came up from Mississippi and paid the family a visit. On his way back, he was taking Emmett's cousin Wheeler Parker with him to spend time with relatives down South. When Emmett heard that, he wanted to go.  But Emmett's mother had other plans. She wanted to take a vacation and drive to Omaha, Nebraska. Mamie hoped that by coaxing Emmett with an opportunity to learn to drive on the open road, he would opt to go with her instead. But for Emmett, news that his cousins would be spending the summer together in Mississippi was an opportunity he didn't want to pass up.  The day before Emmett left, Mamie gave her son Louis Till's signet ring, one of the few possessions she had from her former husband. The next day, Mamie raced her son to the train station. Their kiss goodbye would be the last time she would see her son alive. |  |

1. What was life like for Emmett Till growing up?
2. What was life like for other African American teenagers in the North and South?

**Document 9:**

In the summer of 1955, Mamie Till gave in to her son's pleas to visit relatives in the South. But before putting her only son Emmett on bus in Chicago, she gave him a stern warning:

"Be careful. If you have to get down on your knees and bow when a white person goes past, do it willingly."

Emmett, all of 14, didn't heed his mother's warning. On Aug. 27, 1955, Emmett was beaten and shot to death by two white men who threw the boy's mutilated body into the Tallahatchie River near Money, Mississippi.

Emmett's crime: talking and maybe even whistling to a white woman at a local grocery store.

Emmett's death came a year after the Supreme Court's Brown v. Board of Education decision outlawed segregation. For the first time, blacks had the law on their side in the struggle for equality. Emmett's killing struck a cord across a nation. White people in the North were as shocked as blacks at the cruelty of the killing. The national media picked up on the story, and the case mobilized the NAACP, which provided a safe house for witnesses in the trial of the killers. Emmett became a martyr for the fledgling civil rights movement that would engross the country in a few years.

Mamie Till spoke out about her son's death. She held an open-casket funeral for her son, so that the world could see "what they did to my boy." Emmett's face was battered beyond recognition and he had a bullet hole in his head. The body had decomposed after spending several days underwater.

Roy Bryant, whose wife Carolyn was the white woman at the store, and his half brother, J.W. Milam, were tried for Emmett's murder and acquitted by a jury of 12 white men.

There are conflicting reports as to what Emmett said to Carolyn Bryant, who owned the store with her husband. By most accounts, Emmett and his cousin Curtis Jones, who was visiting from Chicago as well, were playing with other boys outside the store. Emmett pulled a picture of a white girl out of his wallet and boasted to the other boys that she was his girlfriend. The other boys seemed to think it was just bragging by a city boy from the North. But one boy suggested to Emmett go inside the store and talk to the white woman who was running the cash register, especially if he was so good with white women.

Emmett went inside, and by some accounts he whistled at Carolyn Bryant, who was 21 at the time. Others said he bought some gum and made a lewd suggestion to Bryant on the way out. Bryant testified at the trial that Emmett grabbed her and said, "Don't be afraid of me, baby. I been with white girls before."

In the segregated South, punishment for a black male who made a sexual suggestion a white woman was swift. Word got around about what had happened and Emmett's relatives suggested he get out of town as fast as possible.

He didn't leave fast enough. According to historian David Halberstam, Ron Bryant and Milam tracked Emmett down and pulled him from his uncle's house. The beat him but Emmett was unrepentant. So, they decided to kill Emmett to make an example of him. They took him to the river and made him strip down naked. "You still better than me?" Milam asked Emmett. "Yeah," the boy said. Milam shot him in the head. They tied Emmett's body to a cotton gin fan and dumped it into the river.

Unfortunately, Emmett's killing was only one of thousands of similar murders in the South, and his name is not well-known. But the case was an important turning point in America's civil rights struggle.

1. What did Emmet do in the general store?
2. Why do you think Mamie Till-Mobley decided to show her son’s mutilated body?
3. What do you think of Mamie-Till Mobley’s decision to have an open casket and of *Jet* magazines decision to publish the photos?

**Document 10:**

**The song written by Bob Dylan**   
  
**The Death of Emmett Till**  
  
  
"Twas down in Mississippi no so long ago,  
When a young boy from Chicago town stepped through a Southern door.  
This boy's dreadful tragedy I can still remember well,  
The color of his skin was black and his name was Emmett Till.  
  
Some men they dragged him to a barn and there they beat him up.  
They said they had a reason, but I can't remember what.  
They tortured him and did some evil things too evil to repeat.  
There was screaming sounds inside the barn, there was laughing  
sounds out on the street.  
  
Then they rolled his body down a gulf amidst a bloody red rain  
And they threw him in the waters wide to cease his screaming pain.  
The reason that they killed him there, and I'm sure it ain't no lie,  
Was just for the fun of killin' him and to watch him slowly die.  
  
And then to stop the United States of yelling for a trial,  
Two brothers they confessed that they had killed poor Emmett Till.  
But on the jury there were men who helped the brothers commit this awful crime,  
And so this trial was a mockery, but nobody seemed to mind.  
  
I saw the morning papers but I could not bear to see  
The smiling brothers walkin' down the courthouse stairs.  
For the jury found them innocent and the brothers they went free,  
While Emmett's body floats the foam of a Jim Crow southern sea.  
  
If you can't speak out against this kind of thing, a crime that's so unjust,  
Your eyes are filled with dead men's dirt, your mind is filled with dust.  
Your arms and legs they must be in shackles and chains, and your  
blood it must refuse to flow,  
For you let this human race fall down so God-awful low!  
  
This song is just a reminder to remind your fellow man  
That this kind of thing still lives today in that ghost-robed Ku Klux Klan.  
But if all of us folks that thinks alike, if we gave all we could give,  
We could make this great land of ours a greater place to live.

<http://il.youtube.com/watch?v=yWP8t02BE_s>

Read the lyrics and analyze the Bob Dylan song “The Death of Emmitt Till”

You can have the students take turns reading verses out loud to the class OR using the website above- listen to the song while reading along with the lyrics.

ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

1. What happened to Emmett Till?
2. Why did this happen?
3. This song is considered a “protest song”. What is this song protesting?
4. How did Emmett Till’s death impact the Civil Rights Movement?

John T. Boylan

Regina Talento

Nilay Nacar

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